# Answers to Seven Questions on SUFISM

Dr. Massoud Homayouni

## Mawlânâ, Jalâloddin Mohammed Balkhi
## (1207 - 1273)

What makes the Sufi? Purity of heart;
Not the patched mantle and the lust perverse
Of those vile earth-bound men who steal his name.
He in all dregs discerns the essence pure:
In hardship ease, in tribulation joy.
The phantom sentries, who with batons drawn
Guard Beauty's palace-gate and curtained bower,
Give way before him, unafraid he passes,
And showing the King's arrow, enters in.

(*Masnavi*, trans. by R.A. Nicholson)

# *Answers to Seven Questions on SUFISM*

by

Dr. Massoud Homayouni
LL.D, Ph.D. (Paris)

*Translated from the Persian by*
F.J. Stone

A Mawlana Centre publication

A publication of
THE MAWLANA CENTRE
London

1st edition September 1990
2nd edition April 1992

© Dr. Massoud Homayouni, 1992
All rights reserved

ISBN 0-9518093-2-6

Other works by the same author:

In Persian

*Answers to Seven Questions on Sufism*
*A History of the Ne'matollâhi Order in Iran*
*The Origins of Persian Gnosis*

In English

*The Origins of Persian Gnosis*
*Memoirs of a Sufi Master in Iran*

All enquiries should be addressed to:

THE MAWLANA CENTRE
34 Hollytree Close
Inner Park Road
Wimbledon
London SW19 6EA

*Answers to Seven Questions on Sufism*

**Contents**


Select List of Terms Used

1. What is Gnosis? 1

2. What are the origins of Persian Gnosis? 4

3. Can Gnosis solve the problems of society today? 6

4. Sufis are considered by some to be idle, passive people who shun the world. What is your opinion? 8

5. When and how did the Sufi chain of spiritual lineage (*selseleh*) come to be formed? 12

6. Some Sufis claim that all *selseleh* apart from their own are false, and that their Master alone is the *qotb* (the head of the spiritual hierarchy). What is your opinion? 16

7. How did the Ne'matollâhi Sufi Order and its various branches come into existence? 18

Diagram showing the branches of the Ne'matollâhi Order. 31

Bibliography. 32

## *Select List of Terms Used:*

| | |
|---|---|
| *aql* | intellect; p.1 |
| *ejâzeh-nâmeh* | document authorising spiritual guidance; p.25 |
| *elm* | exoteric knowledge; p.1 |
| *erfân* | spiritual knowledge, enlightenment; p.1 |
| *ershâd-nâmeh* | document authorising spiritual guidance; p.15 |
| *fanâ fi'llâh* | complete absorption in God; p.3, 15 |
| *hejâb* | impediment, obstacle; p.12 |
| *hekmat-e eshrâq* | "The Doctrine of illumination"; p.4 |
| *jehâd* | Holy War; p.21 |
| *khânegâh* | dervish lodge or convent; p.12, 16, 17, 26 |
| *kherqeh* | mantle of spiritual guidance; p.13 |
| *maqâm* | spiritual stage, station; p.15 |
| *morshed-e kâmel* | the Perfect Spiritual Guide; p.19 |
| *pir* | Master; p.1, 12 |
| *pir-e moghân* | Master of the Magians; p.4, 24 |
| *qiyâs* | analogy; p.15 |
| *qotb* | "pole"; head of the spiritual hierarchy; p.15, 18, 19, 23, 28, 30 |
| *ramz* | enigma, secret; p.5 |
| *samâ* | spiritual concert of music and dance; p.10 |
| *selseleh* | "chain" of spiritual descent; p.12, 13, 16, 17 |
| *sohbat* | companionship; p.16 |
| *soluk* | path; p.1 |
| *tâleb* | Seeker of the Truth; p.2, 12, 19 |
| *tariqât* | spiritual path or dervish order; p.14 |
| *tasavvof* | Sufism; p.1 |
| *vaqf* | religious endowment; p.22 |
| *vali ahd* | heir apparent; p.21 |

# — *1* —

## What is Gnosis?

Gnosis (*erfân*) has been defined as "discovering the Truth of all things through revelation". But in order to do so one must first acquire knowledge of one's self, for it is only by means of self-knowledge that the Truth is attained, which is none other than God. For

"He who knows himself, knows His Lord."

Mawlânâ is reported to have questioned Shams-e Tabriz as to the purpose of knowledge. "Knowledge is that which takes you to its source," replied Shams.

But how does one acquire this self-knowledge? Certainly not by means of the intellect (*aql*), for its powers are severely limited, and the ordinary or external knowledge (*elm*) which it can acquire proves only burdensome to us:

"God hath said: 'Like an ass laden with his books':
Burdensome is the knowledge that is not from Himself."

*(Masnavi, vol.I)*

Self-knowledge can be acquired in one way alone; by the experience of travelling inwardly (*soluk*) on a spiritual path, as it is called. Sufism (*tasavvof*) is one of those spiritual paths and those who traverse it are called Sufis. But it is not advisable to pursue this path alone; a spiritual guide or Master (*pir*) is essential, for as Mawlânâ warns us:

"Choose a Master, for without one this journey is exceedingly full of woe, fear and danger. Without an escort

you are bewildered even on a road you have travelled many times before. Do not, then, travel alone on a Way that you have not seen at all. Do not turn your head away from the Guide." *(Masnavi, vol.I)*

But how does one go about finding such a guide? First one should be wary of those who lay claim to be Masters, for the true Master makes no claims for himself, indeed having attained to union with God he no longer possesses a self with which to claim anything. He knows that it is God, and God alone, who guides by His Light through the intermediary of the Master.

One should also not follow the lead of others, for the same Master will not necessarily be right for every person, nor will a Master necessarily accept everyone as a disciple. It is for the Seeker (*tâleb*) to find his own Master and if, in his heart of hearts, he truly and sincerely wishes to do so, he will, for "When the pupil is ready, the Teacher is found".

Mawlânâ gives the Seeker who has found a guide the following advice about his behaviour towards him:

"When the Master has accepted you, take heed, surrender yourself to him. May none but he be your Master and captain!" *(Masnavi, vol.VI)*

When the Traveller accepts the authority of the Master, the light of divine grace flashes into his heart, for the Master is like the Moon which receives its light from the Sun and transmits it to us.

"The devotee of darkness sees the light immediately that he becomes subject to the authority of the Master." *(Masnavi, vol.VI)*

This Light of divine grace is none other than Love, for Light and Love are the same thing. It is Love which purifies the heart, ridding it of its impurities, until it becomes sufficiently pure to receive the infinite form of the Unseen. It is for this reason that Sufis often liken the heart to a rusty metal mirror which must be cleaned and burnished before it can reflect the vision of God:

"When the mirror of your heart becomes clear and pure,
You will see images of the Unseen and the Image-Maker.
*(Masnavi, vol.II)*

The further one progresses upon the inner spiritual path, the more one's heart is illumined by Light and Love, until one reaches the stage of complete absorption into one's divine source (*fanâ fi'llâh*), where no trace of self remains. Shaykh Mahmud Shabestari, in his work *Golshan-e Râz*, "The Rose-Garden of Secrets" explains it in this way:

"In the empty heart, void of self
Can be heard the echoing cry,
'I am the Truth'.
Thus is man one with the Eternal,
Travelling, travel and traveller have become one."

This is how Mawlânâ describes his experience of passionate love for the divine which overwhelmed his being:

"Love came and like blood filled my veins and tissues
Emptied me of myself and filled me with the Friend.
The Friend has taken possession of every atom of my being.
The name is all that I have left now: all the rest is He."

## — 2 —

### What are the origins of Persian Gnosis?

The oldest source of Persian Gnosis is to be found in Mithraism, an ancient Persian spiritual path which began in Eastern Iran many thousands of years ago. Mithraism involved belief in Mithra, the God of Light, and comprised seven ascending spiritual stages, the final one being that of the Magian Master (*pir-e moghân*). It was a spiritual path for the élite, not a religion for the masses and thus often came into conflict with the religion of Mazdaism in the same way that Sufism has with fundamentalist Islam.

Belief in Mithraism reached its peak during the reign of the Achaemenids (550-331 B.C.) and the Arsacids (248 B.C.-226 A.D.). But when the Sassanians came to power in 226 A.D. and adopted Zoroastrianism as the state religion, their fierce opposition to Mithraism led to the persecution of its followers and attempts to destroy all traces of the cult. But the Mithraic cult did not die out; its sacred doctrines were transmitted secretly by Magian Masters to their disciples. After passing through many vicissitudes it was enriched by the advent of Islam: thence emerged the "Doctrine of Illumination" (*hekmat-e eshrâq*).

Of the Doctrine of Illumination in the first centuries of Islam there is little trace, apart from a few expressions and mysterious allusions made by such great gnostics as Mansur al-Hallâj, Bayazid-e Bastâm and Shaykh Abu'l Hassan Khorqâni. It was not until the second half of the sixth century of Islam that Shehâboddin Yahya Sohravardi, known as the Shaykh of Illumination, codified it on the instructions of his Master.

Sohravardi, a great gnostic and radical new thinker, ranks as

one of the most outstanding figures in Iranian culture. In his immortal work, the Doctrine of Illumination, he has the following to say about its sources:

> "The source of the Doctrine of Illumination is not derived from the doctrines of the Zoroastrians or the Manichaeans, but from the wise men of ancient Persia."

Shahrzuri, a disciple of Sohravardi, and a distinguished theologian and gnostic, was the first to write a commentary upon the Doctrine. Here he stresses the importance of possessing spiritual knowledge in order to comprehend the Doctrine fully:

> "Whereas it is possible to comment exoterically upon the Doctrine of Illumination with the aid of traditional (exoteric) knowledge, for an esoteric interpretation a different kind of knowledge is required, that of the inner knowledge derived from spiritual rebirth.
>
> Until a person has travelled inwardly to his own heart and penetrated to the meaning of the mysteries of his own inner life, he will never be capable of interpreting the spiritual message of the Doctrine of Illumination. For the Doctrine has been written as an enigma (*ramz*) so that only the enlightened may solve it."

The Doctrine of Illumination possesses two aspects; the exoteric or theoretical and the esoteric or practical.

As regards the first aspect, the theoretical, after the death of Sohravardi, the Doctrine of Illumination was studied by many Persian scholars and gnostics, who wrote commentaries upon it, the most important of these being that of Qotboddin Shirâzi (1236-1310).

In the 17th century, during the Safavid era, the Doctrine of Illumination flourished under Mir Shams al-Din Mohammed Bâqer Astarâbâdi, known as Mir Dâmâd, and his disciples. Amongst them, Sadraddin Shirâzi, known as Mollâ Sadrâ, the greatest sage of the Safavid period, was a follower of the Doctrine of Illumination and wrote a valuable appendix to it.

As regards the second aspect of the Doctrine of Illumination, the esoteric or practical, this is none other than that of the spiritual path of the Persian Gnosis of Love, down which the majority of the great gnostics of Iran such as Mansur al-Hallâj, Attâr and Hâfez have travelled. One of the greatest gnostics to take this path was Jalâloddin Mohammed Balkhi, known as Mawlânâ, who, in his *Divân* (Collected Poetry) and *Masnavi*, a six-volume encyclopaedia of mystical knowledge, presented the world with the most sublime expression of Persian Gnosis, that of divine love.

Thus it was that, as a result of the God-given genius and fiery passion of Mawlânâ, the two paths of Persian Gnosis, of Love and of Asceticism, which had, for many centuries, run side by side, parted company and the Path of Love became the main path chosen by the world's greatest mystics.

## — 3 —

### Can Gnosis solve the problems of society today?

It used to be thought that all the problems of society could be solved by material means, and that technological progress would improve the quality of life, but the fact that mankind today has never been so unhappy and ill-at-ease with itself is clear evidence that the answer does not lie in materialism.

Faced with more problems today than ever before, with social injustice, unemployment, economic crises, insecurity and the threat of war, and so on, man has become anxious and distressed. Weary of his monotonous life, devoid of spiritual goals, and not knowing which way to turn for help, man has often resorted to alcohol and narcotics to escape from problems and responsibilities, or even dropped out of society itself. But rather than provide solutions, these have only led man astray in new ways and led to even more self-alienation.

Recently, however, there has occurred almost all over the world a movement towards spirituality, for it has been recognised that only self-knowledge, by which man learns his rightful place in the world, can bring harmony, universal peace, brotherly love and perfect freedom.

Gnosis is active and dynamic, and leads, rather than follows, society. But it begins with the individual himself, for until a person has changed himself through self-knowledge, he can never change the world. First of all the prison walls of egotism and self-importance, which isolate us from our fellow creatures, must be broken down. Only then is it perceived that all existence is one, and that there is no difference between oneself and others. And as part of one universal family, anything which hurts another, hurts us too. As Sa'di says:

> "The sons of Adam are like the members of one body, for in their creation they have a common origin. If the vicissitudes of fortune involve one member in pain, all the other members will feel a sympathy. The person who is indifferent to the sufferings of others is unworthy of the name of man." *(Sa'di, Golestân)*

Only the person who realises this truth is truly worthy of the name of Man, and only he can serve mankind selflessly,

without egotism, self-interest or desire for fame and fortune, and lead others to do the same. It is with this purpose that, inspired by Mawlânâ, the Mawlânâ Centre has been established. It has the specific goal of diffusing to the world the purest form of spiritual knowledge known to man, that of the Persian Gnosis of Love, as set forth by Mawlânâ in his works.

"Good fortune lies in service,
Unaware of this are men.
He who becomes a dervish
Is the true sovereign."

## — 4 —

**Sufis are considered by some to be idle, passive people who shun the world. What is your opinion?**

It is quite untrue to say that Sufism has encouraged people towards self-indulgence and retreat from the world. On the contrary, true Sufism, which is none other than love for God, has always been, by its very nature, a movement of spiritual regeneration, whose influence upon society, especially as regards beliefs, behaviour and skills, has been profound. The following consists of a few of the invaluable services rendered to society by Sufis.

Firstly, one has only to look at the history of the *Javânmardân** and the important role they played in defending the independence and preservation of Persian culture when,

---

* The *Javânmardân* were members of a Sufi Order of Chivalry whose ideals were those of valour and social justice.

under foreign rule, the Persians were subjected to injustice and oppression, first by the Umayyads and later by the Abbasid Caliphs, the Mongols and the Turks. It was members of this Order who helped to organise uprisings against their oppressors in the form of secret national organisations and who always fought against tyranny and injustice.

Secondly, Sufism has always promoted open-mindedness and enlightenment, opposing those with narrow dogmatic views who adhere to the strict letter of religion, who consider that worshipping God is a matter of external acts of devotion alone. Sufis respect the basic religious observances, but they worship God through Love and consider a person's purity of heart, sincerity and service to mankind to be the expression of true religion rather than external rituals.

> "The religion of Love is apart from all religions:
> For lovers the only religion and creed is—God."
>
> *(Masnavi, vol.II)*

Sufism has always played an important peace-making role in settling disputes on religious differences and in defusing fanaticism, for Sufis have always laid great emphasis upon actions and public service, rather than upon dogmatism.

Sufi Masters demonstrated their respect for the members of all religions in a practical way by paying visits to their places of worship, which had an important effect on establishing mutual respect and also in attracting people to their movement. The violent disputes and quarrels which occurred among members of different religions did not occur among Sufi Masters. For example, Shaykh Abu'l Hassan Khorqâni and Abu Sa'id Abu'l Khayr were of the Hanafi school, while Ghazzâli was of the Shafi school but this made no difference to the respect which they showed one another, and was not a source of friction between them, for, as Mawlânâ says:

"The disagreements of mankind are caused by names:
Peace ensues when they advance to the reality of the name."

*(Masnavi, vol.II)*

Thirdly, Sufism has always actively promoted and supported the idea of equality amongst all men, by breaking down social barriers. In Sufi teaching circles, lodges and *samâ** gatherings, there was no distinction made between rich and poor, and Shâh and beggar sat side by side as equals. This question of social equality was one to which the great Sufis purposefully paid great attention.

A fourth example of Sufism's invaluable service to mankind is in the preservation of the arts of ancient Iranian culture. Some of these arts, such as painting and sculpture, had no place in the religion of Islam, while others, like music and dance, were denounced by fundamentalist clerics. It was Sufis who, in the fourth and fifth centuries of Islam, gradually and ingeniously managed to bring the arts back into the fold of Sufism without incurring public disapproval, for, in the early centuries in particular, Sufis had a reputation for irreproachable piety and asceticism.

By means of their colourful patched robes, ornate prayer-mats, beribboned and crocheted caps, the ornamentation of prayer niches, the gilding of the *Qor'ân* and similar works, the Sufis were instrumental in reviving the art of painting. Without outraging public feeling, the Sufis also made music and dance popular and acceptable, not as entertainment, but as a form of worship performed for the sake of God, called *samâ*. Music and dance became so accepted that some groups of Sufis considered them to be an integral part of spiritual training and worship of God.

---

* *samâ*, literally "hearing", is a spiritual concert of music and dance.

"Now in the mystic dance of joy in The Beloved,
Losing head and foot like the revolving heavens.
In every strain which they hear from the minstrel
Comes to them rapture from the unseen world.
The mystic song is not those mere words and sounds,
For in every note thereof there lies a precious mystery."

*(Golshan-e Râz)*

The prevalence of music had also a great and beneficial effect on Persian literature by giving to poetry more beautiful metres, suitable for setting to music and for dancing. But the service that Sufism rendered to Persian literature is far greater than this, as everyone with an acquaintance with Persian literature will be well aware.

Prior to the influence of Sufism, the subject matter of Persian poetry was mainly that of panegyric on battles, hunting, and palaces, little poetry being written for any other reason but that of securing special favours for the poet. As for love, when this was mentioned it referred exclusively to earthly love, usually in the form of sexual attraction. Even in the most delicate odes of the poet Farrokhi, which represent the highest form of Persian poetry in this respect, love is depicted as a trade, and the beloved as a slave boy or girl to be purchased; whereas it is obvious that feelings for marketable goods can scarcely be defined as love.

It was Sufism which rescued Persian poetry from this banality and decadence, putting an end to the shameful begging, sycophancy and dissimulation of the poets, and bestowing upon Persian literature the gifts of truth, service to others, and above all, love of God. It was the Sufi concept of divine love which endowed Persian poetry with such exquisite beauty. In fact, one may dare to say that, had Sufism not come to the aid of poetry and raised it to this higher state of consciousness,

imbuing it with passion, delicacy and spirituality, Iran would today, apart from the epic *Shâh-nâmeh* of Ferdawsi, possess no works in verse form worthy of the name of literature.

The point should be made that the memorable deeds and laudable qualities referred to here are attributable only to true Sufis of wisdom and truth, not to those corrupt men who feign Sufism in order to seek fame and fortune, by gathering numerous followers around themselves, setting up lodges *(khânegâh)* and deceiving the simple-hearted.

## — 5 —

### When and how did the Sufi chain of spiritual lineage (*selseleh*) come to be formed?

The word *selseleh* means "chain", and it is from all chains or attachments but one, that of divine love, that those who seek God must endeavour to free themselves. For all else but this is, for the seeker of Truth (*tâleb*), nothing but an impediment *(hejâb)* to union with Him, and results in fanaticism, disputes and strife.

In the early days of Sufism there were no dervish orders as we know them today, but simply individual Masters and their groups of disciples. A Master, often called a Shaykh*, or *Pir* would give spiritual guidance to his disciples and then, when they became perfect in knowledge, grant them permission to

---

* References to Shaykhs throughout refer to independent Masters and not those appointed temporary "deputies" for their Masters (also called Shaykhs), whose authority to give limited spiritual guidance terminates with the death of their Master.

act as independent Shaykhs by investing them with the *kherqeh* (mantle of spiritual guidance). Some Shaykhs received the *kherqeh* not from one but several Masters, for it was also the custom, in former times, for Shaykhs to send on to a higher Shaykh those disciples whom they had instructed as far as they were able and who had attained a certain spiritual station.

Masters would pay visits to one another and send their disciples on such visits too. While it is true that differences did sometimes arise between different Masters, they always showed respect to one another. Had this system continued until the present day, Sufism would never have lost its direction in the way it has.

The *selseleh* was, in those days, a simple line of spiritual succession, but when, with the expansion of the Sufi movement, the Muslim clerics condemned Sufism as an innovation, the Sufis sought to legitimize their *selseleh* back to the beginnings of Islam. Thus those Sufis who were Sunni Moslems traced all their lines back to the first Caliph Abu Bakr Seddiq, and those who were Shi'i traced theirs back either to Ali or to one of the other Imams.

In fact, we know that in the time of Abu Bakr and Ali, there were no references made to Sufism, its expressions and terminology. Had there been, mention of it would surely have occurred in the three battles of Ali (Jamal, Siffin and Nahravân) for things tend to be brought into the open in times of war, and these wars began with Ali's succession to the Caliphate in 656 A.D. and continued for another hundred years, without a single word about Sufism being uttered on either side. Whilst it is true that the spiritual path *(tariqât)*, that is to say, the inner path of the *Shari'at* (Religious Law), did exist, having as its sources the *Qor'ân* and the *Sunna* (custom) of the Prophet, and was followed by the Muslim élite, it was not then formulated in Sufi terms.

As time went on, particularly after the 11th century A.D. many new dervish orders were formed and drew up their own spiritual lineage. But with the institutionalisation of Sufism, its true spirit was lost, and emphasis was placed more upon producing an external show of Sufism than upon inner truth.

Those who laid claim to be Masters, who feared possible rivalry and wished to retain all power for themselves, abandoned the former practice whereby all those disciples who had reached a certain spiritual station were given permission to act independently during their Master's own lifetime. This was replaced by the concept of a single head, a sole successor to a particular Master, to succeed him after his death.

Because, when the name of this successor was revealed during the Master's own lifetime, it resulted in jealousy and disconent amongst the other disciples, who had been passed over, some Masters sought to prevent this, and to give hope to all, by not disclosing the name. They did, however, designate their successor in their wills, details of which were kept secret until after their death. But, in spite of these precautions, disciples who had not been mentioned in the will still came forward claiming to be successors, and this inevitably caused discord among the dervishes of the order. So some Shaykhs sought to avoid any problems in the future by taking the convenient course of leaving their wealth, reputation and their disciples to a member of their own family, thus making the succession hereditary in practice, if not in principle. When questioned, they would insist:

> "Succession is not hereditary. It just so happens to have remained in this family for a few generations."

Dervishes in Iran did not protest against this practice, perhaps because the concept of hereditary succession was not a new one to them, for within the strict class system in

Sassanid times, sons had always followed in the profession of their fathers.

With respect to hereditary succession in the Ne'matollâhi Order, one of the largest and most important orders in Iran, some have claimed that, since the succession to the founder, Shâh Ne'matollâh Vali was, apparently, hereditary for ten generations, this practice is, therefore, quite acceptable. But since our knowledge of the descendants' lives in India is extremely scanty, we are not in a position to be able to ascertain, whether this was, in fact, the case and even if it was, whether it was necessarily a good thing. Those who put forward such arguments have already accepted the principle of heredity, and then seek to justify it by means of analogy* *(qiyâs)*. But analogy, which is the comparison of dissimilar things, does not lead to the truth, and cannot be used as evidence.

It is not always recognised that there is a vast difference between the physical and the spiritual. Attainment to sainthood depends not upon being the physical son of a *qotb*** (pole), or upon the possession of an *ershâd-nâmeh* (document of authorisation), but upon one's own spirituality, i.e. of reaching the spiritual station (*maqâm*) of complete absorption in God (*fanâ fi'llâh*). The saint who has reached this station has no trace of egotism or self-interest left in him with which to show favouritism towards his own flesh and blood; for him his disciples are his spiritual children.

It is because many Sufi orders took advantage of the convenient policy of hereditary succession that the majority of them have concentrated mostly upon the social and ceremonial

---

* According to a *Hadith*, analogy was first employed by Satan.

** *qotb*, which means "pole", is a title given to the head of the spiritual hierarchy, for he is considered to be the spiritual pole or axis around whom the world revolves.

aspects of Sufism within the institution of the *khânegâh* (Sufi lodge) and neglected the training of disciples, to which Shaykhs used to give their personal, individual attention.

> "If you desire spiritual poverty, that depends on companionship (*sohbat*) with a Master. Neither your tongue nor your hand avails." *(Masnavi)*

The training of disciples requires just as much care as the nurturing of plants in a garden. Not only must the gardener recognize the special needs of every plant but he must continually provide the individual care and attention necessary for its growth. If his knowledge of gardening is deficient and he is therefore unable to supply what is necessary at a particular time, or he does possess this knowledge but withholds it, he is to be held personally responsible.

## — 6 —

Some Sufis claim that all *selseleh* but their own are false, and that their Master alone is the *qotb**.What is your opinion?

It is pure arrogance for anyone to claim that he is the only true saint and that all the rest are false; as for those who believe such claims, they not only reveal their fanaticism but also their ignorance of the history of Sufism and the spiritual chains of descent** (*selseleh*).

---

* The head of the spiritual hierarchy (see note on previous page).

** See Question Five on p.12.

Fanaticism is incompatible with spirituality, which is concerned not with the things of this world, but with the search for God. To consider that only one's own spiritual chain (*selseleh*) and Master is genuine, and all the rest false, is to replace worship of God by worship of individual men. One should be wary of those who set themselves up as Masters, for a true Master never does so. He knows that guidance comes only from God, who extends his hand in whichever way he sees fit to those whom he suffers to seek him.

> "There is no other direction but that of God
> Who guides whomsoever he wishes." *(Qor'ân)*

Mawlânâ, in the *Masnavi*, often speaks scathingly of the pretensions of such people:

> "Ignorant persons parade with drum and banner, saying, "We are couriers speeding in the path of spiritual poverty and non-existence." They boast far and wide of being Shaykhs and pretend that they have attained to the rank of Bayazid. And, having, as they claim, travelled away from their selves and become united with God, they then set up lodges for disciples in the abode of pretension."

Persian Literature contains many criticisms of false Sufis. Hâfez, in his poetry, often speaks of deserting the lodge or *khânegâh*, to escape from its hypocrisy:

> "Head spinning from the *khânegâh*'s pious hypocrisy
> Goes Hâfez to the wine-house to find true sobriety."

Such imposters, who set up lodges full of pomp and ceremony, depend on their disciples to spread propaganda about them in order to trap the simple-hearted.

"The language of the dervish is used by vile men
In order to gain influence over the simpleton
And while the work of holy men is as pure light and heat
The work of vile men is naught but cunning and deceit."

*(Masnavi, vol.I)*

With regard to the question of someone claiming that their Master is the only saint, the *qotb* (pole) of the spiritual universe, this shows that they are unaware that all Men of God are one. Mawlânâ, speaking of the unity of the saints says:

"Though they may be a thousand, they are of one body;
It is only our imagination which sees plurality."

## — 7 —

### How did the Ne'matollâhi Sufi Order and its various branches come into existence?

A detailed history of the Ne'matollâhi Order and its branches has been written by the author elsewhere*. The following is a summary of its history and of the formation of its branches.

Sufism flourished in Iran, despite disputes between the Moslem clerics and the Sufis, until the Safavid period. At first the Safavids found the strength of Sufism useful to them

---

* See the author's *History of the Ne'matollâhi Order in Iran, 1799-1979*. This work was written with complete impartiality, and if it has caused offence this is regretted; the truth is not always pleasant.

as it brought them to power, their first ruler, Shâh Esma'il I (1501-1524) being called "The Perfect Spiritual Guide" *(morshed-e kâmel)*, but later, because of their enmity for the Ottoman Empire, which was Sunni Moslem, the Safavid Shahs slowly distanced themselves from Sufism, concentrating their energies instead on the promotion of Shi'a Islam and its clergy. As a result, the religious classes gained the upper hand over the Sufis, most of whom, including the successors of Shâh Ne'matollâh Vali, the founder of the Ne'matollâhi Order, left Iran for India.

After the Safavid era, Iran was torn apart by the continuous wars of Nâder Shâh and, after his death in 1747, fell into an even greater state of disorder and confusion. There were rebellions and riots in every part of the country, for Iran had lost its economic and vital life force, drained by the pressure of members of the ruling and religious classes upon the lower and working classes, who were ready to rise up in a single movement of protest.

It was at this juncture that the twelfth successor to Shâh Ne'matollâh Vali, the *qotb* (pole) **Shâh Ali Rezâ Deccani*** of Haydarâbâd in India, appointed two of his disciples as his deputies and sent them to Iran to give spiritual guidance to Seekers of the Truth (*tâleb*) and to reestablish the Ne'matollâhi Order. These were Mir Abdol Hamid **Ma'sum Ali Shâh*** and **Shâh Tâher Deccani**.

The words which **Ma'sum Ali Shâh** spoke, of freedom

---

* From the time of **Shâh Ne'matollâh Vali** the title "Shâh" was added to the name of the *qotb* (pole), for he was regarded as the spiritual ruler of the realm of the Soul, and later, from the time of **Ma'sum Ali Shâh**, the name of "Ali" was added also. [The Sufi names of the Shaykhs of the Ne'matollâhi Order are printed in bold to distinguish them from the temporal rulers, or Shâhs of Iran.]

from the unnecessary restrictions of society and religion, were completely new to the people of Iran. Instead of the harshness and fanaticism of the religious classes, who were attached to the externals of religion, **Ma'sum Ali Shâh** invited disciples to discover a new world of spiritual truth, mystic states and love. He spoke of universal peace, explaining how the wars of the nations of the world were caused by their inability to comprehend the truth. He made disregard for the rich and powerful, sacrifice and concern for the poor the bases of the Order. Emphasizing the need to liberate oneself from worldly desires, he fought against hypocrisy and deception and summoned those who had for years accustomed themselves to dissimulation, lies and flattery to act with truth and sincerity.

**Mas'um Ali Shâh**'s first disciple and successor was **Nur Ali Shâh** of Esfahân, who was ready to lay down his life for his faith. With his pleasing aspect and charming voice, he incited the people in every quarter, like Moses, to rise up against the Pharaoh of the age, saying:

"I come again like Moses to reveal the White Hand
In the Red Sea once again to drown Pharaoh and his band."

Not only did mystics come to revolve like moths around his flame, but so also did all those who had despaired of life, having been deprived of refuge, movement or expression by the religious and ruling classes, and the movement flourished. The clerics, realising that their own market was dead, urged the rulers and Shâhs of the age to banish this group, accusing them of rebellion for adding the title "Shâh" to their names.

Thus Sufism in Iran was, at this time, a dynamic, radical and progressive movement, a true spiritual uprising against the fundamentalists with whom it fought strenuous battles. In the ensuing years, after much strife and persecution, and as a

result of the machinations of the clerics and rulers of the time, **Ma'sum Ali Shâh, Nur Ali Shâh** and a number of other dervishes, were killed. Their disciples continued to be persecuted under the Qâjâr ruler Fath Ali Shâh (1797-1834), who was bitterly opposed to Sufism.

When Fath Ali's son, Abbâs Mirzâ was *Nâ'ib al-Saltanah*, Iran was defeated by the Russian Czar, and in 1813 a preliminary treaty of Golestân was signed by which Persia ceded to Russia many of its provinces. In 1826 the religious leaders declared Holy War (*jehâd*) on the Russians, on the pretext of their ill-treatment of the Moslems of Kafkas, and incited the people to attack them. Abbâs Mirzâ, who had been appointed heir apparent (*vali ahd*) in 1818, was ill-prepared for war and knew that they faced certain defeat; he was, however, compelled to fight. The subsequent defeat of the Iranian army and the shameful Treaty of Turkomanchây in 1828, by which Iran lost even more of its territories, resulted in innumerable calamities for the Iranian peoples.

This behaviour naturally did not endear the religious classes to Abbâs Mirzâ and so he secretly viewed their adversaries, the Sufis, with favour. **Kawsar Ali Shâh**, the successor to **Nur Ali Shâh,** who, as a result of the opposition of the Mollâs had been unable to remain in Hamadân, came to Tabriz where he was received with honour by him. Abbâs Mirzâ then accompanied **Kawsar Ali Shâh** to Kermân where the latter was later to pass away.

Abbâs Mirzâ also appointed two Sufis, Mirzâ Nasrollâh Ardabili and Hâjji Mirzâ Âqâsi as tutors for his sons. One of his sons, Mohammed Mirzâ, became a Sufi, and when he acceded to the throne in 1834 as Mohammed Shâh Qâjâr, the situation completely changed to the benefit of the Sufis, who enjoyed royal favour. Mohammed Shâh appointed his Sufi Master, Hâjji Mirzâ Âqâsi, *Sadr-e A'zam* (Chief Minister) in

place of the *Qaim Maqâm*, and his other tutor, Mirzâ Nasrollâh Ardabili, who was one of the Shaykhs of the Ne'matollâhi Order, became *Sadr al-Memâlik*, the Head of Religious Foundations (*vaqf*).

It was at this period that **Mast Ali Shâh**, who had broken away from **Kawsar Ali Shâh** and the main stream of the Ne'matollâhi Order (see opposite), was successful in gaining royal patronage. He was granted the income from an entire village near Shiraz by the Shâh, and his successor **Rahmat Ali Shâh** was appointed *Nâ'ib al-Sadr* (Deputy Head of Religious Foundations) of the province of Fars. His son, who succeeded him on his death, in 1837, as *Nâ'ib al-Sadr** tells us, in his work *Tarâ'iq al-Haqâ'iq* (The Paths of Truths), about the effect of this appointment on others:

> "After a *farmân* was issued appointing **Rahmat Ali Shâh** *Nâ'ib al-Sadr*, the behaviour of the religious classes and the nobles of Fars towards him changed radically and, instead of shunning him and calling him an infidel, all began to show him the greatest respect and courtesy."

Thus the path of the Ne'matollâhi Sufi Order in Iran reached a new stage, for not only did the religious and ruling classes refrain from oppressing dervishes, but gradually most of the nobles and dignitaries of Iran either became followers of the Order as dervishes or affected dervishhood.

But this influx of people devoid of faith, who feigned dervishhood, but were interested only in gaining positions of influence and acquiring riches, had a detrimental effect upon Sufism. Not only did it result in the Masters losing the good reputation and the high esteem in which they had formerly been held by the populace, but in the gradual dispersal of

---

* It was the custom for such titles to be passed down from father to son.

the spiritual unity and integrity which is an essential part of the world of Sufism, in which self-interest has no place. Disputes occurred which deflected the movement from its true course, and caused it to form into different branches.

*The Dispersal of the Unity of the Ne'matollâhi Order*

Prior to his death, **Nur Ali Shah** had appointed **Hosayn Ali Shâh** as his deputy. **Hosayn Ali Shâh** succeeded him as the undisputed *qotb* (pole) of the Ne'matollâhi Order until his death in 1818. But **Nur Ali Shâh** had also, during his lifetime, in the year 1791, given joint authorisation to give spiritual guidance to two of his disciples, **Majzub Ali Shâh** Kabudar Âhangi, and **Kawsar Ali Shâh** Hamadâni.

The two carried out **Nur Ali Shâh**'s instructions without any kind of dispute until the death of **Majzub Ali Shâh** from typhoid in Tabriz in 1823. Although **Kawsar Ali Shâh** was the only rightful successor to **Nur Ali Shâh**, having been named as such in his will, a disciple of **Majzub Ali Shâh** called Hâjji Zayn al-Âbedin Shirvâni, entitled **Mast Ali Shâh**, claimed to be his sole successor*, and, refusing to acknowledge **Kawsar Ali Shâh** as *qotb* (pole), broke away from the mainstream of the Ne'matollâhi Order to form a branch of his own (see p.25).

The line of succession to **Kawsar Ali Shâh** thus became known as the *Kawsariyyeh* to distinguish it from the branches formed after the death of **Majzub Ali Shâh**. Because the *Kawsariyyeh* Masters continued the early practice of granting authorisation during their own lifetimes to those disciples

---

* The *Sadr al-Memâlek*, Mirzâ Nasrollâh Ardabili, tutor to the young Mohammed Shâh Qâjâr, and a Shaykh of the Ne'matollâhi Order, was with **Majzub Ali Shâh** when he died, and there was then no mention of **Mast Ali Shâh** being named as his successor.

worthy to give spiritual guidance there was never any disagreement about succession, nor was there ever any question of there being just one single head, for many of the Masters named more than one successor, each of whom acknowledged the others. Succession in the *Kawsariyyeh* has only, on one occasion, been hereditary, in spite of the fact that many of the sons of these Masters were dervishes of distinction.

**Kawsar Ali Shâh** was succeeded by **Jannat Ali Shâh**. He had two successors, **Majzub Ali Shâh** and **Samad Ali Shâh**. **Samad Ali Shâh** was succeeded by **Zohur Ali Shâh**, and **Majzub Ali Shâh** was succeeded by **Hâjji Mo'in al-Olemâ**. The latter had three successors:

(i) Mirzâ Ali Khân Khalvati entitled **Nosrat Ali Shâh** and known as *Bâbâ Khalvati*;

(ii) Mawlânâ Mohammed Hassan entitled **Mahbub Ali Shâh** and known as the *Pir-e Marâgheh* (The Master of Marâgheh);

(iii) Abu Ali Samandar, known as **Shaykh Samandar.**

However, out of respect for **Mahbub Ali Shâh**, **Nosrat Ali Shâh** and **Shaykh Samandar** refused to give spiritual guidance while he was alive, referring all those who wished to become dervishes to him.

During his lifetime **Mahbub Ali Shâh** gave authorisation for spiritual guidance to a number of his disciples. Like the former *Kawsariyyeh* Masters, he did not believe in nominating a single successor to succeed him after his death, and so did not do so in his will. One of his successors is **Bâbâ Cherâgh**, who was not only granted authorisation to give spiritual guidance to others by **Mahbub Ali Shâh**, but also by a Hidden Master (*pir-e moghân*).

*The Formation of the Four Branches*

When, in the year 1837, **Mast Ali Shâh**, who had claimed to be the sole successor of **Majzub Ali Shâh** (see p. 23), passed away, he was succeeded by **Rahmat Ali Shâh.**

When **Rahmat Ali Shâh** died in 1861, two of his disciples, **Sa'âdat Ali Shâh** and **Munavvar Ali Shâh**, claimed to be his sole successor, by virtue of an *ejâzeh-nâmeh* (document of authorisation), each refusing to accept that of the other as genuine. Later there was another claimant to the succession, **Safi Ali Shâh**. It was from these three claimants that the branches of the *Gonâbâdiyyeh*, the *Munesiyyeh* and the *Assembly of Brotherhood* were formed:

*1. The Gonâbâdiyyeh*

When Hâjji Mohammed Kâzem Tanbâku-forush, entitled **Sa'âdat Ali Shâh** and known as *Tâvus al-Orafâ* (The Peacock of the Gnostics) claimed to be the sole successor to **Rahmat Ali Shâh**, a group of dervishes followed him to form a branch of their own.

On his death, **Sa'âdat Ali Shâh** was succeeded by **Soltân Ali Shâh Gonâbâdi**, from which this branch takes its name. He was succeeded by his son **Nur Ali Shâh**, who was in turn succeeded by his son **Sâleh Ali Shâh**. The latter was succeeded by his son **Rezâ Ali Shâh** Tâbandeh, who is at present resident in Iran.

Thus it can be seen that succession to the leadership of this branch has always, until the present day, been hereditary.

*2. The Munesiyyeh*

Hâjji Âqâ Mohammed, entitled **Monavvar Ali Shâh**, a paternal uncle of **Rahmat Ali Shâh** had also claimed to be his sole successor and set up his own branch. On his death in

1883 he was succeeded by his son Hâjji Ali Âqâ, entitled **Vafâ Ali Shâh.**

Before **Vafâ Ali Shâh** died in 1918 he appointed his son Mirzâ Abd al-Hosayn, known as Zu'l Riyâsatayn, and entitled **Munes Ali Shâh**, as his successor, but because the latter was still young, he asked Sayyid Esma'il Ojâq Kermanshâhi, **Sâdeq Ali Shâh***, to stand in temporarily as guardian and spiritual tutor to his son. **Sâdeq Ali Shâh** did so for four years and handed back the leadership of the Order, during his own lifetime, to **Munes Ali Shâh**, for whom he had held it in trust.

When **Munes Ali Shâh** passed away in 1953, never having actually officially named a successor**, a number of his disciples claimed succession to the leadership of this branch. Among them were:

(i) Hâjji Zayn al-Âbedin Pâqal'ai, called **Ne'mat Ali Shâh**, who had given spiritual direction in his *khânegâh* (Sufi lodge) in Esfahân for many years.

(ii) Abd al-Hojjat Balâghi, entitled **Hojjat Ali Shâh**, who lived in Tehran.

(iii) Dr. Javâd Nurbakhsh, the son-in-law of **Munes Ali Shâh**'s brother***, who, at the age of 27, bought up **Munes Ali Shâh**'s lodges in Tehran and Kermânshâh from his heirs, and proceeded to take up residence there as the successor to **Munes Ali Shâh**, taking control of the affairs of the order.

---

* See note on **Sâdeq Ali Shâh** on p. 28.

** A fact confirmed by N. Pourjavady and P. Wilson on p.253 of their history of the Ne'matollâhi Order entitled "The Kings of Love" (Tehran, 1978).

*** It should be explained that **Vafâ Ali Shâh** had three sons:

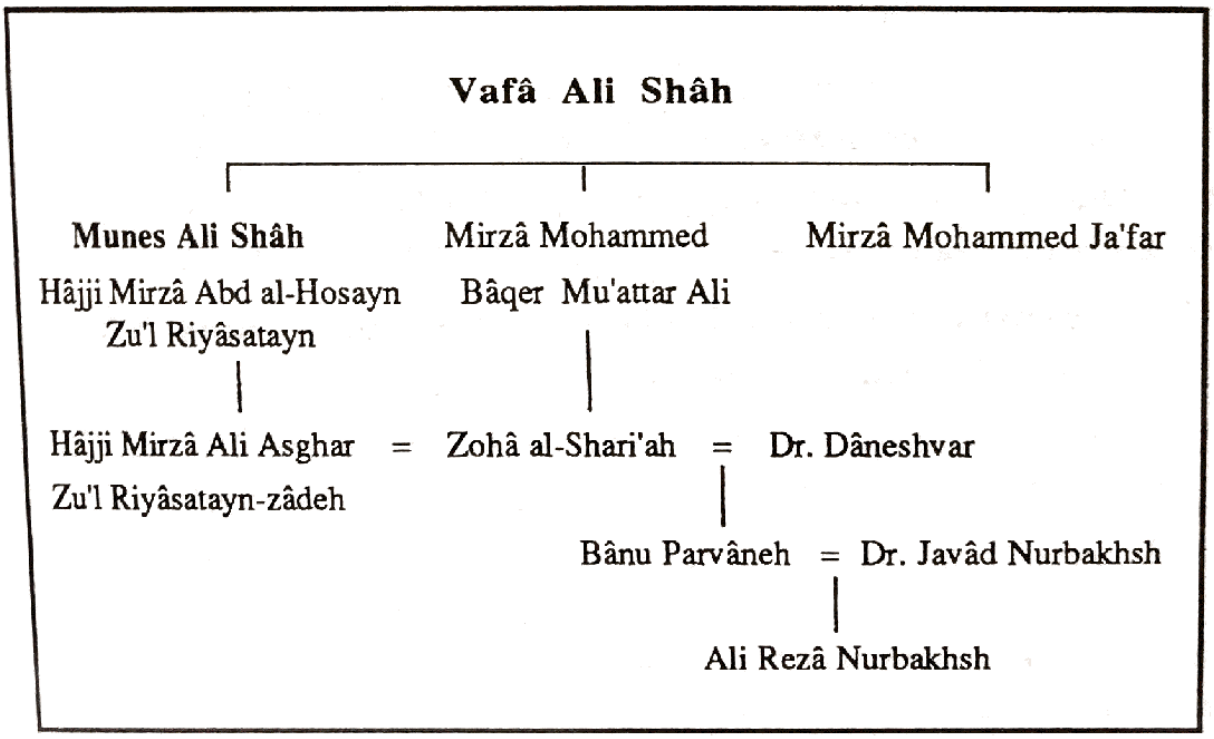
(i) Hâjji Mirzâ Abd al-Hosayn Zu'l Riyâsatayn, entitled **Munes Ali Shâh**, who succeeded his father, **Vafâ Ali Shâh**. He had two sons: Âqâ Mirzâ Mohammed Kâzem Zu'l Riyâsatayn-zâdeh and Hâjji Mirzâ Ali Asghar Zu'l Riyâsatayn-zâdeh.

(ii) Mirzâ Mohammed Bâqer Mu'attar Ali. He had four sons and a daughter, Zohâ al-Shari'ah.

(iii) Mirzâ Mohammed Ja'far.

Zohâ al-Shari'ah, the daughter of **Vafâ Ali Shâh**'s second son (see (ii) above), was first married to a Dr. Dâneshvar, by whom she had a daughter, Parvâneh Dâneshvar. The daughter married Dr. Javâd Nurbakhsh by whom she has a son, Ali Rezâ Nurbakhsh.

On the death of Dr. Dâneshvar, Zohâ al-Shari'ah (Dr. Nurbakhsh's mother-in-law) married Hâjji Mirzâ Ali Asghar Zu'l Riyasâtayn-zâdeh, **Munes Ali Shâh**'s second son (see (i) above). Thus, through his wife, Dr. Nurbakhsh is related to the family in two ways, both as son-in-law to **Munes Ali Shâh**'s son, and to **Munes Ali Shâh**'s brother.



Dr. Nurbakhsh at present resides in London and has, according to his own information, 120 lodges in Iran and 15 outside (9 in America, 5 in Europe and 1 in Africa). He has produced many publications, among them a *Divân** (Collection of Poetry) and latterly the periodical *Sufi* of which his son, Ali Rezâ Nurbakhsh, is Editor. It is known that Ali Rezâ Nurbakhsh has been nominated by his father as his successor.

Thus it can be seen that in this branch also succession to the leadership of the Order has always, until now, been exclusively from the families of **Rahmat Ali Shâh** and **Monavvar Ali Shâh****.

### *3. The Assembly of Brotherhood*

There was also another claimant to the succession of **Rahmat Ali Shâh**, although he did not do so immediately. This was Mirzâ Hassan Esfahâni, entitled **Safi Ali Shâh**, who at first accepted the authority of **Monavvar Ali Shâh** (see *Munesiyyeh*, p.25), but later retracted and, refusing to acknowledge any other claimants but himself, began to give spiritual direction independently in Tehran, justifying himself with these words:

---

* Doubts have been expressed by Nuroddin Modarres-e Chahârdehi in his work *Sayri dar tasavvof* (Tehran, 1361) p.135 as to whether this *Divân* is not really the work of a certain Farrokhi Hamadâni.

** Incidentally, although it has been claimed in "The Kings of Love" (for details of which see note p.26):

> "That the spiritual hegemony of Rahmat's [**Rahmat Ali Shâh**] family had nothing to do with favouritism is borne out by the fact that the next *qotb* [**Sâdeq Ali Shâh**] was not even a relative",

it should be remembered that **Sâdeq Ali Shâh** was only appointed temporary head, as mentioned on p.26.

"Spiritual poverty (dervishhood) means abandoning disputation; it is not a matter of paper testaments. Wars and wrangles are the way of noisemakers, not of the spiritual."

**Safi Ali Shâh** designated Zahir al-Dawla, entitled **Safâ Ali Shâh**, to succeed him, who, in turn, designated **Entezâm al-Saltanah** as his successor. But when the latter found the responsibility too great for him, **Safâ Ali Shâh** decided that the eleven members of the secret advisory committee called "The Assembly of Brotherhood" *(Anjoman al-Okhovvat)*, set up in the time of **Safi Ali Shâh**, should manage the affairs of the branch.

Each member of the Assembly is elected for life. On the death of one of its members, the others choose a replacement from among the dervishes of the Order. Its head, deputy head and secretary are chosen by the Assembly from amongst themselves. The heads of the Assembly after **Safâ Ali Shâh** were as follows:

(i) Entezâm al-Saltanah
(ii) Dr. Esma'il Marzbân (Amin al-Mulk)
(iii) General Farajollâh Aq Evli
(iv) Abdollâh Entezâm, son of Entezâm al-Saltanah

### 4. *The Shamsiyyeh*

This branch was formed when Sayyid Hosayn Istarabadi claimed to be the successor of **Majzub Ali Shâh**. Little is known about the *Shamsiyyeh* Masters, except for its most famous Shaykh, after whom the branch is named, **Shams al-Orafâ**.

## *Conclusion*

Cannot the fact that not one of these branches of the Ne'matollâhi Order acknowledges any of the others to be genuine be taken as conclusive proof that Sufism has gone astray from its true path?

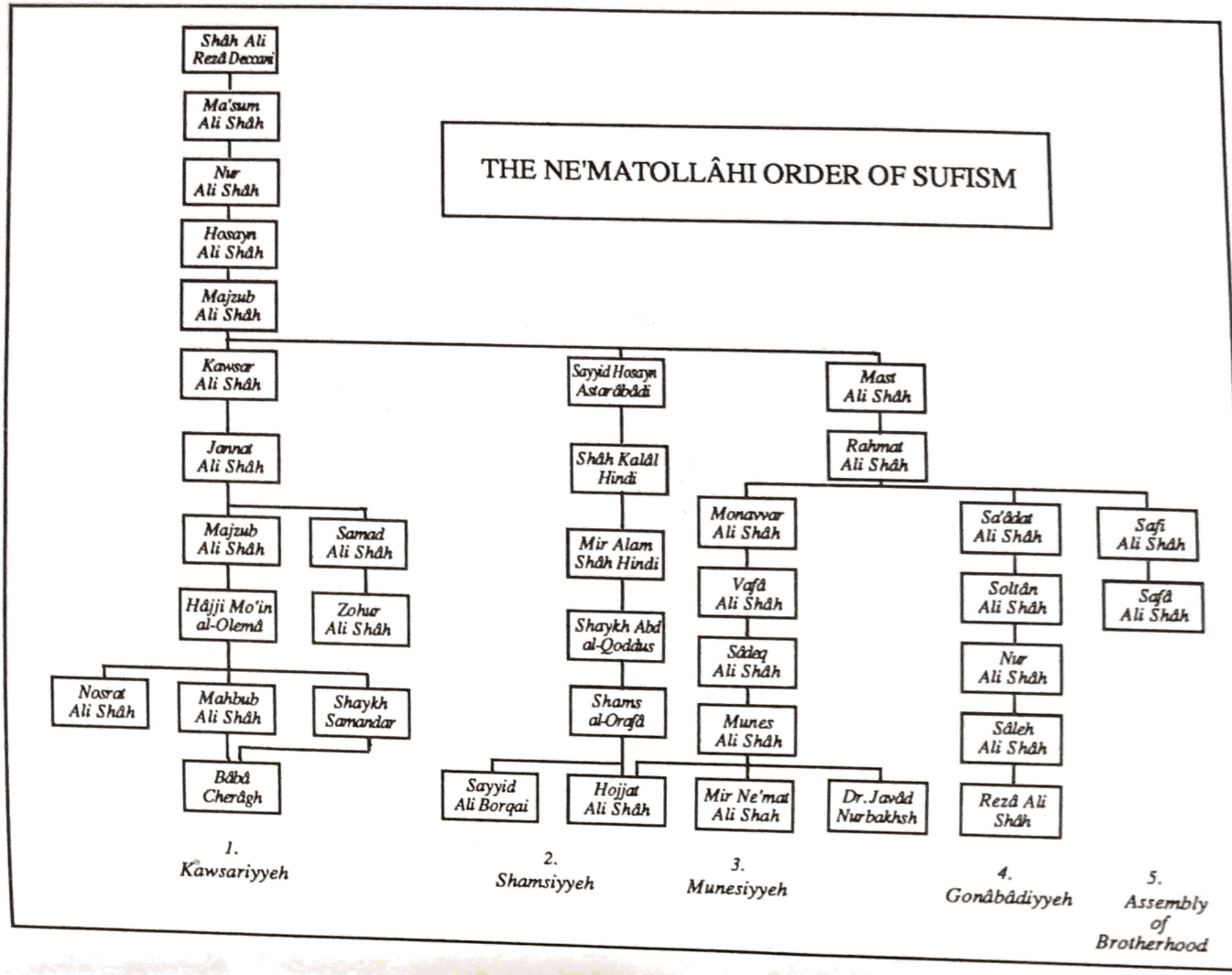
If those who claim to be Shaykhs and *qotb* (poles) are really so, why then do they not unite and set up a school free from selfishness and idle talk? Why do they not join forces to give spiritual guidance to seekers of the truth? Of what use is Sufism in name only?

Mawlânâ, on the subject of the unity of the saints, says in the *Masnavi*:

"His deed is thy deed, O man of wisdom:
Know that between the Faithful is an ancient union.
The Faithful are numerous, but the Faith is one:
Their bodies are numerous, but their soul is one.
The souls of wolves and dogs are separate, every one;
The souls of the Lions of God are united."

***

*Diagram showing the branches of the Ne'matollâhi Order*



## Persian

Nuroddin Modarres-e Chahârdehi
*Sayri dar tasavvof (Tehran, 1361 H.S.)*

Sayyid Hojjat-e Balâghi
*Maqalât al-hunafâ (Tehran, 1371 H.Q.)*

Mohammed Ma'sum Shirâzi (Ma'sum Ali Shâh)
*Tarâ'iq al-Haqâ'iq (Tehran 1345 H.S.)*

Dr. Massoud Homayouni
*Târikh-e selselehâ-ye tariqât-e ne'matollâhiyyeh dar Iran (Tehran, 1358 H.S)*

*Sarcheshme-ye erfân-e Iran (Tehran, 1368 H.S.)*

## English

Nasrollah Pourjavady & Peter Lamborn Wilson
*Kings of Love, the Poetry and History of the Ni'matullâhi Sufi Order (Tehran, 1978)*

Dr. Massoud Homayouni
*The Origins of Persian Gnosis*
(first ed. London 1989, revised ed. 1992)

# *The Mawlânâ Centre*

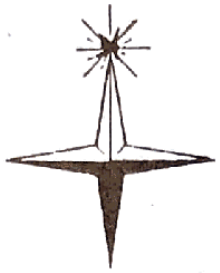
The Mawlânâ Centre was established in January 1989 as a registered charity, devoted to the promotion of the spiritual teachings and application of Sufism, and in particular the spiritual teachings of Mawlânâ, Jalâloddin Mohammed Balkhi.

The Centre holds weekly seminars on the *Masnavi* of Mawlânâ and on Sufism throughout the year. These seminars, which are given in Persian, take place at the School of Oriental & African Studies (SOAS), London University, on Fridays between 4.30 and 7.30 p.m. in Room G 56 (Ground Floor). They are free of charge and open to all.

The Centre produces a Persian-English quarterly journal of Sufism entitled *Ershâd* (Guidance). If you would like to receive a copy, or are interested in becoming a member of the Centre, please complete the enclosed form and return it to:

The Mawlana Centre
34 Hollytree Close
Inner Park Road
Wimbledon
London SW19 6EA

1 1012 01131 3691



کتب عرفان ایران

In this short work, Dr. Homayouni answers seven questions of vital importance to an understanding of Sufism in the past and the present.

Beginning with a definition of Gnosis, Dr. Homayouni traces the origins of Persian Gnosis, and then addresses not only the question of the relevance of Gnosis today but the role which it has played throughout the history of Iran. The next subject is that of the Sufi chain of spiritual lineage, and how this has often been the cause of disputes and fanaticism. Finally, he reviews the history and branches of the Ne'matollâhi Order, one of the most important Sufi Orders in Iran.

This is a work which looks with clarity and insight into the nature and role of Sufism, clearing away many misconceptions. It is a work which no student of Sufism can afford to ignore.

*Produced by the Mawlana Centre*

ISBN 0-9518093-2-6